

Do you see Jesus in toast?

Losing resolution in art and divining images.

You wake up and drowsily make your way to the kitchen for some breakfast; as you pick up the burnt slices of toast and scrap the surfaces with a butter knife, an image appears before your eyes. As the bobbling of the coffee pot ** you realise what you see is Jesus staring back at you.

The *previous* is the premise of 2007's Buzz Poole's "Madonna of the Toast" a collection of religious and secular icons appearing in burnt toast.

Why does this happen and what does it have to do with the loss of resolution in digital art?

This phenomenon is called seeing faces or "pareidolia", a type of clustering illusion, which is the tendency present in all human beings to see patterns in seemingly random events.

An optical theory that dates back to Neo impressionism; an innovative and avant-garde movement largely influenced by the development of photography in the mid-1880s. For a myriad of reasons, art started to evolve away from literal representation. The development of the camera rendered painting obsolete in giving an accurate representation of the World.

Now equipped with the technology to capture a detailed image in minutes; the artist had to rethink plastic arts to follow a more experimental route. The medium couldn't rival photography in terms of preciseness, so it differed through the abstraction of form. Pointillist theory affirms that when dealing with a cluster of dots; a bigger distance creates a whole.

In the same way, I would argue that we are currently pioneering a new understanding of visual art. A new understanding once again concerned with what happens in the missing spaces; the gaps filled by our minds.

In our present time, an amount of information that is too large to understand is available to us. This is explained partly by Moore's law, which states that the processing power of the computer doubles every 18 months. In other words, the acceleration of development in computer technology is getting faster and faster.

Paradoxically to these technical advancements, we see the opposite in contemporary art. Or at least in its representation. A group of artists are deliberately ridding their work of detail. This deliberate loss of information for stylistic purposes is called digital primitivism.

We make art to create a record of a specific time, place, person, or object and to express and communicate concepts. And in the age of information, we have developed multiple methods to convey information in the most optimised way possible. Bypassing quality for

speed. This is called lossy compression, which is essentially patchy information almost immediately understood by human senses. Our brains easily make up for what's missing. Images don't have an actual raw form, just more or less efficient ways of being shown.

From text semi-graphics to digital compression; image is information, interpreted by our brains in different ways. Missing information is a way of opening up interpretation and creating excitement in art.

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Sociologist Bruno Latour has theorised technology as a mode of existence, a "particular form of the exploration of being." Technological artefacts have always evolved alongside Human beings. Nevertheless, the boundaries between us and the machine are becoming increasingly blurrier and the computer has become ubiquitous. How do we make the commonplace sublime as opposed to banal?

Our bodies are slowly adapting to changes in behaviour which are the consequences of this phenomenon. Sometimes the changes are faster (but fortunately temporary), a notable instance would be the occurrence of a gamer dent, in which a minor dent in a person's hair or skin appears after a prolonged period of wearing a headset. We are becoming one with the machine.

In the age of information and where technological hedonism reigns, a specific age cohort of contemporary artists has grown up during the 1990s with a PlayStation at home. An age remembered for the beginning of the death of arcades and the growth of the home console, we could still escape digitally and the socialisation came from multiplayer modes or video game discussion during recess and other breaks. We played games as a way of escapism - to have adventures- and to bond. This is a very specific relationship to technology which is somehow both used to socialise and isolate ourselves.

This idea echoes the philosophy of Romanticism, because of its deep appreciation for nature, and the supernatural, and an idealised view of the past as a more noble era. It celebrates the heroic and the sublime. Stéphan Barron, first developed the concept of Techno-romanticism in the early 90s, a term which rings particularly true in today's epoch of the digital nostalgic.

Something beautiful happened in the simplicity of the images; with the lack of realism came a certain uniqueness of texture.

The way things looked stemmed from the performance limitations of the time. For graphics to play smoothly, various compression techniques were used which would eventually create what is known as "PSX aesthetics".

Dithering: the process of applying a pattern between two colors to create the illusion of a third color

Anti-aliasing: blurring pixels to make things appear smoother

Flat-shading: emphasising individual polygons

Color banding: a subtle but undesired form of posterisation

All seen through analog CRT Television; when it was still a monolithic object. A totem embodying the closest thing to spirituality in the Western living room, before it became the flat surface slowly disappearing from today's homes.

The same is true today, a streaming service will dynamically reduce quality before retorting to buffering and subsequently lose engagement. The digitation of everything also furthers economic gaps with different classes having different access to the latest tech. Contemporary indie games tend to favour low-resolution aesthetics. Felvidek (released this year) or Samurai Unicorn (to be released) are examples of this re-appropriation of performance or budgetary limitations for stylistic purposes. It's an effective way of conveying a mood as the user can focus on the goal instead of being distracted by a superfluous amount of detail.

We go back to the visuals of this time because of nostalgia but also because this was our first exposure to an incredibly engaging and immersive art form that is increasingly gaining credibility. This is a globally unifying culture and has retained an ingenuite childlike view of the world. There is deep sentimentality in an image of a half-eaten burger with fries from Bioshock: Infinite.

In my eyes, there is an immense homesickness expressed in the PSX graphics. Every pixel is familiar and the vast spectrum of human expression, feeling, and thought is embedded bit by bit.

Perhaps to slow down the "Future Shock" and information overload we are experiencing. There is too much change in a too short period of time, people are not able to adjust to the quickening pace of digitality, otherwise known as the condition of living in a digital culture. We draw inspiration in our art from said digital culture.

This isn't just true of digital art but it's something we can also observe in analog works through artworks favouring this retro aesthetic and developing new techniques, notably using a combination of airbrush and masking tape to simulate the look of anti-aliasing and low polygons. The name coined for this growing movement is digital primitivism. Icons of our digital culture can also be the subject of such works. Will we start seeing Lara Croft in 3D toast? Being overwhelmed with choice has resulted in artists creating deliberate restrictions, and crafting intentional stylistic choices. These self-imposed limitations open up possibilities and make us wonder: what will be the next way of conveying ideas?

Sources

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